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ABSTRACT

The questions that are central to the curriculum field--why certain things should be taught, who should get what knowledge, what rules should govern the teaching of school subjects, and how the components of the curriculum should be interrelated--indicate that curriculum development is not a neutral, technical activity. Curriculum development requires sophistication, judgment, and intelligence, and only secondarily a technical skill. (Author/IRT)

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PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION IN CURRICULUM*

by

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The task of reviewing and analyzing the evolution of systematic curriculum development during the period when curriculum became a self-conscious field of specialization proved to be a formidable one for obvious reasons. One was faced with a monumental array of educational activities much of it at least pertinent to and even definable as curriculum activity. Not the least of the problems in preparing the review of curriculum development, therefore, was one of arriving at a reasonable conception of what constitutes systematic curriculum development -- what counts as curriculum activity and what may be reasonably excluded. Singularly uninstructive in this regard were the many definitions of curriculum that have appeared over the years in journal articles, commission reports, and curriculum textbooks -- definitions such as "the curriculum consists of all experiences that a pupil has or is likely to have in school," and "a sequence of potential experiences is set up in the school for the purpose of disciplining children and youth in group ways of thinking and acting."

Similarly unilluminating was the injunction that curriculum development is what curriculum developers do. During the period when I was perplexed by this problem, I attanded a social gathering in the course

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The paper entitled, "Systematic Curriculum Development, 1890-1959: An Interpretive Survey," which appears on the program and was written earlier for the National Institute of Education, was a very lengthy one and could not be delivered in the time allotted at the AERA conference. The present paper is partly in the nature of a reflection upon the larger paper, focusing on a conceptual problem in writing it.

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of which I observed a professor of physics dancing the bugaloo. If physics is what physicists do, I thought, then surely those gyrations shoudd be included. Ultimately, it appeared that no simple, straightforward observation of what people did could be very helpful in arriving at a definition of the field unless one first had a reasonable conception of what constituted that field, and this conception remained in a state of constant interaction with the perceived activities. But where would such a conception come from?

The approach I took in attempting to resolve this dilemma was based on an examination of those persistent questions that have over the course of 70 years or so characterized the curriculum field. In other words, one could ask oneself, what questions have been characterized as curriculum questions by the actors who themselves engaged in the process of trying to answer them? And, in similar fashion, to what extent were these problems regarded by others as appropriate to curriculum development? In general these questions flowed from what, at least on an intuitive level, could be regarded as the central problem of the curriculum field: what should we teach? The question of what should we teach is analogous to the central question in economics, how can we mediate between unlimited wants and limited resources? If human wants were sharply circumscribed, enough so that there would be no scarcity, or if available resources existed in such great abundance as to create no problem in meeting all human wants, then there would be no field of economics. Likewise, if there were no such activity as teaching and no issue as to whether we should teach this thing or that, then there would be no field of curriculum. To carry this one step further, if human mental capacities were so great that everything could

be known or if the amount of knowledge available were so small that it could be known to everyone, then we would have no need for the study of curriculum. Given this starting point, what should we teach, one can then proceed to examine the questions that inevitably, or almost inevitably, flow from that general consideration.

One feature of the work that curriculum developers do, particularly those who associate themselves with curriculum theory, involves providing justifications for why we should teach this rather than that when we plan school activities and programs. The central question of the curriculum requires a value decision. It implies choice among competing options. Thus, curriculum developers are not simply interested in "effective" ways of teaching history, but with the question of what, if anything, makes history a worthwhile study. Presumably, we do not deliberately teach something simply because, like Mount Everest, "it's there." Benjamin Franklin recognized the crucial nature of this question when, in 1749, he set forth his proposals for educating the youth of Pennsylvania. "As to their STUDIES," Franklin declared, "it would be well if they could be taught every Thing that is useful, and every Thing that is ornamental; But Art is long, and their Time is short. It is therefore propos'd that they learn those Things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental...."[1]

Curriculum decision-making also involves the problem of distribution. In other words, one should be prepared to address the question of who should get what knowledge through the institution of schooling generally, and the vehicle of curriculum in particular. As the English sociologist Michael F.D. Young has contended, all knowledge is socially constructed, and this

is of fundamental importance in curriculum thinking. Young and others have argued from this sociology of knowledge vantage-point that "The school curriculum becomes just one of the mechanisms through which knowledge is 'socially distributed'."[2] If this "socially distributed" knowledge gets parceled out according to, say, social class or race, then this would have the highest significance for any relationship we may assume between education and social mobility. When knowledge is taken to be a commodity of value and the curriculum the major mechanism of deliberate distribution (as in the case of the distribution of capital goods and services generally), we would like to know who gets what. To say, "We should teach history," therefore, is an elliptical statement. We must always teach something to someone, and this implies some attention to the question of who gets taught history and who does not.

But knowledge is not simply a commodity. The effects of studying history or mathematics or foreign languages cannot be conceived of merely as product. To be sure, we may learn particular things. We may learn names and dates in history, how to solve quadratic equations, and we may become proficient in a foreign language; and knowledge of these things may turn out to be of fundamental social significance. But the study of various subjects has an effect also on the way we think. This presumed effect on thinking itself has a crucial bearing on what we mean by effective when we set about considering "effective" programs in this or that subject. Thus, in science, we may consider product (knowing the atomic valences) to be clearly subordinate to the consideration of science as a mode of inquiry. Therefore, in curriculum planning, we may choose to emphasize those features of science that exhibit the nature of scientific inquiry rather

than science as a codifier of knowledge. This notion of the effects of studying a subject as opposed to merely mastering the content of a subject was astutely recognized by John Henry [Cardinal] Newman in his consideration of the idea of a university. Referring to what we now call disciplines as "Sciences," Newman argued that although these "Sciences" all have as their common end "the attainment of truth," it becomes the office of the educator to consider them"as regards the influence which they exercise upon those whose education consists in the study of them."[3] In other words, the disciplines of history, science, and mathematics, would exist and function, obviously, even if there were no schools and no curriculum. In systematic curriculum planning, we consider not only their general status and function as disciplines, but what happens to people and to their ways of thinking when they engage in the study of these disciplines. In their effort to take into account what they regard as the desirable effects of studying a subject, therefore, curriculum developers also give deliberate attention to how subjects should be taught. They consider not only what should be taught and what knowledge gets distributed to whom,but what rules should govern the teaching of a subject, since the way one teaches unquestionably influences the effects that accrue from the study of a subject.

Newman also alludes to a related issue of supreme importance in deliberate curriculum development: the question of balance and integration of the various studies. The fields of study, he said, "into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings on one another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand, comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, balance each other."[4] An additional feature

of systematic curriculum development, then, is close attention to balance and integration with respect to the various components of the curriculum rather than seeing the subjects of study as isolated and insulated entities. It is not simply the individual effects of studying various subjects that becomes crucial, but the overall effect of the various studies seen in relation to one another.

To reflect faithfully the nature of the enterprise, one must, therefore, expand the notion of curriculum development beyond the commonsensical definition of curriculum as the subjects of study and even the topics and subheadings that fall under them. The problems and issues that define curriculum as a field of study imply at least four principal considerations: (1) Curriculum development includes justifications for why certain things should be studied in school in preference to others. While there may exist a naive assumption that the subjects of study are to be taken for granted, and that curriculum planning merely involves finding ways to teach these subjects effectively, it becomes the office of the curriculum developer constantly to assume a critical posture with respect to what is taught and to examine the assumptions, implicit and explicit, that underly the inclusion of these studies in the school curriculum. (2) In any such consideration of why we teach something, we are bound to take into account not just the thing to be taught, but who is taught. And, therefore, this question involves not merely why we teach something, but to whom and under what circumstances knowledge gets distributed. (3) Since the way we approach the teaching of any knowledge inevitably affects what knowledge gets conveyed, the study of curriculum includes a set of rules that governs the teaching of the things to be studied. A common outcome of curriculum development,

then, is the notion that one should teach such and such to so and so in this way. (4) A further concern of the curriculum field has been the ways in which the components of the curriculum, however they are defined, are interrelated. To be sure, curriculum developers want things like history and science and foreign languages to be taught "well;" but above and beyond that criterion of effectiveness, they would like to think of these relatively independent studies as coming together ultimately into an integrated whole, a whole which, by the way, we tend to regard as what it means to be educated in the modern world.

These four dimensions of systematic curriculum development become critical, not simply as a way of defining the field of study called curriculum as it has evolved during the twentieth century, but as a way of laying to rest a common misconception about the field. This misconception takes the form of assuming that curriculum development is a relatively neutral, technical activity; that is, it is often assumed that curriculum development consists of using well-established, standardized means to accomplish certain agreed-upon ends. Although the common tendency in a technological society is to treat problems as if they were amenable to a standard technique, curriculum problems remain resistant to this approach. Probably the most important reason for this is that, as in educational theory generally, all the important problems of curriculum include a value component. As Ernest Nagel put it, to ignore "the presence of this value component of educational theory, certainly would be to discuss Hamlet without taking into account the Prince of Denmark."[5] The questions that are central to the curriculum field -- why certain things should be taught, who should get what knowledge, what rules should govern the teaching of

school subjects, and how should the components of the curriculum be interrelated -- are all value questions. Curriculum development requires sophistication, judgment, and intelligence and only secondarily a technical skill.

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